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TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE HISTORY OF THE INDIAN RELIGIONS I.

The many identical terms in the Vedic and Avestan literature, items of the religious practice, details of the mythology — apart from the grammatical, metric-poetic congruencies — are well-known proofs of the common roots of the Indo-Iranian religion; — this is a fact known since long.³ Elements of this common religion² — i.e. mythology and ritual — can be better seen in the Vedic literature because the Iranian material is in fact Zarathuštra's version. Zarathuštra has kept for the Avestan religion only those moments which were either relevant for any religion therefore could easily be a part of the earlier or the later development in the Iranian religion, or were supporting Zarathuštra's own revelation. (Contradicting to that the alien Proto-Indo-Aryan gods were by him condemned.) A third reason for including some parts of the prae-Mazdean old corpus into the new Iranian religious literature could well have been the popularity of certain gods and cults through which devotees could be won round to new trends. Other archaic elements of the Avesta originate from indigeneous cults taken gradually over from the prae-Indo-Iranian substratum or tradition, like Anāitis, though officially only after the 5th century B.C.³

This does not, however, mean that the early Vedic religion preserved intact the earlier Proto-Aryan elements. On the contrary: the process of the evolution of the Proto-Indo-Aryan religion was long and complicated. Its changes were subjected to the migratory life of the Proto-Indo-Aryan tribes on one hand, and to the influence of the religions they come across during temporary, but not necessarily short, contacts with the local population, on the other. The substratum has not equally influenced the new-comers being itself variegated. Further on, as it is testified in the Rgveda, the gradual infiltration into India has certainly affected each immigrating wave differently. The late-comers have always found their antecedents qualitatively changed both in regard of their way of living (changed into, or towards a sedentary form) and, accordingly, in regard of their religious practice. This can be perhaps seen in the myth of the Daśarājña (RV. VII. 19.)⁴, or, for instance, in the epic myth of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas.⁵

The separation of the Proto-Aryan tribes into two major branches took place well outside the geographical horizon of their later homes, sometime between 3000–2000 B.C.⁶ From the Proto-Aryans the future Indo-Aryans and those having immigrated into Near East separated first.⁷ Those tribes which later poured into North India in successive waves of conquerors, lived for a considerable time west of the borders of the already gradually declining Indus Valley Civilization.⁸ Moreover, a number of eminent scholars had charged them with the destruction of the Indus Valley Civilization,⁹ a view untenable any longer.

There they arrived as semi-nomadic pastoral folks with the knowledge of agriculture (and got acquainted with the irrigation wherever it was in use) but their real wealth and strength lied in their horses and horse-drawn chariots. They had a high esteem for cattle which has always been object of their aspirations as it can be seen in many of the *R̥gvedic* hymns. Skeletal remnants found at the excavations seem to speak in favour of certain horse-cult which is supported by casual finds of horse figurines¹⁰, and at other places may well have been a ram-cult, associated also with the people of the second millenium B.C.¹¹ It may be worth noted that Agni is the Vedic god associated both with horse (likened to horse in RV, his chariot is being drawn by red horses; in the *Mahābhārata* *Ādi* P. 3. Agni appears as horse) and ram (*R̥gvedic* passages — e.g. X. 162. 4., I. 162. 2–4., I. 163. 12–23. — mention that the sacrificial goat precedes and announces the deceased to the fathers when sacrificed during the funerary rites; Agni's *vāhana* is a ram in the post-Vedic literature; in the *Rāmāyana*, *Bala Kanda* 48–49 he is helping Indra giving a goat's testicle to him when cursed by *Viśvāmitra* etc.)¹².

It is also Agni among the Vedic gods who is one of the chiefs, nearly a fifth of the *R̥gveda* is addressed to him, and he is who alone is having a sacrificial altar where offerings are made to the other gods, therefore without his intermediary role the sacrifice does not reach its destination. This special function of the sacrificial fire can well be seen in the Zoroastrianism growing into a Fire-cult.

It seems to be an intriguing problem where to connect those giant buildings discovered in northern Afghanistan (*Dashli*–3) and identified as centre of fire-cult¹³. The type of the construction connects it with the Mesopotamian architecture, its function with the Iranian Fire-cult. On a charcoal acquired from between the two floors, with *C*₁₄ analysis the excavators dated the building to 1110 B.C. The Zoroastrian temple fire-cult cannot, however, be attested prior to the historic (late Achaemenian) period¹⁴. This may not concern the domestic fire-cult which M. Boyce on the account of its common appearance both with the Indo-Aryans and Iranians, thinks to be of high antiquity¹⁵.

For well-established reasons then we can exclude the connection between the *Dashli* fire-temple and the Zoroastrian Iranians, and look for another explanation. According to Burrow¹⁶ there were the Proto-Indo-Aryans living in Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan during the 2nd millenium B.C. who were conquered by the arriving Iranians.

These *daēva*-worshippers (called so from the Iranians' view point) had already developed a religion of their own, different from the Proto-Aryan to which form only a few gods and cult-practices can be connected from the Vedic-Avestic lore. The best of the examples is shown again by T. Burrow giving the most convincing analysis of the asura-problem¹⁷. The original Proto-Aryan Asura has lost its importance after the schism between the Proto-Iranians and Proto-Indo-Aryans. For the latter group new gods took over the place and functions of the earlier deities: Varuna, Mitra, Indra and the *Nāsatyas*. These gods, being common for both the groups of the Proto-Indo-Aryans¹⁸ had temporarily acquired the key-roles in the Proto-Indo-Aryan religion.

The religion and the cults are, however, subjected to the circumstances their followers happen to live in. We may surmise that for the centuries spent in Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan, the religion of the (eastern) Proto-Indo-Aryans has though essentially remained the same, certain changes were unavoidable.

The unchanged part of it can be best seen in contrast with the ahuran aspects of the Zoroastrianism¹⁹, because it constituted the religion of the earlier Aryan (i.e. Proto-Indo-Aryan) inhabitants who were gradually subjugated by the Iranians who took advantage of the weakness of the Proto-Indo-Aryans which has been created by that that their certain groups were migrating towards India on the east, and towards Near East on the west. While the earliest Iranians might have supported (for political reasons?) or, at worst, maintained a neutral attitude towards them, Zarathuštra has condemned them and degraded them to the level of demons and forbade their worship²⁰. It is significant that the *daēvas* of the Proto-Indo-Aryans had later completely lost their identity in Iran and only certain features ascribable to them found their way into later Zoroastrianism.

Changes took place in the (eastern) Proto-Indo-Aryan religion for at least two reasons.

The Proto-Indo-Aryans when settled in Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan have not arrived into vacuum. We have ample archaeological evidence for the ethno-cultural milieu they found there. On most of the territories in concern local variants of the Indus Valley Civilization flourished. Many of them survived the decline and abandonment of the Harappan sites. The strip between the Iranian plateau proper and the Indus Civilization shows characteristic features coming from both the western and eastern neighbours. The excavations referred to under note 8 prove this almost without exception. In these areas, let it be oasis-cultures or river-side settlements, the agriculture was the main form of livelihood: farming was always augmented with animal-breeding. The farmers have practiced some kind of irrigation, with canals or with *gabarbands*. As sedentary agriculturists their religion was basically a fertility cult with the Mother Goddess in its centre. The elaborate religion of the Indus Valley people has reached these areas only superficially. There were, however, cult centres in the administrative centres where the priesthood seems to control

both these aspects of life. They must have been independent from the Harappans to a great extent, and on the account of their different environmental situation, have certainly developed specific features in their religious practice. This might have been the case in Bactria where the fire-cult must have evolved from the religion of chalcolithic, pre-Indo-Aryan, population. They alone were responsible for building huge palaces and cult-centres which was an alien custom for the Proto-Indo-Aryan tribes before they settled there. In fact, for most of these tribes, it had remained strange to build temples (even permanent houses for long duration), their ritual activity was centred around a pole called *yūpa* taken as a symbol of the axis mundi, through the cosmic tree notion (RV., IX. 5. 10). The sacrificial ground, called *vedi* appears already in the RV (II. 3. 7., X. 1. 6. takes it as the 'centre of the world'), but it becomes an elaborate brick structure, requiring a good deal of mathematic knowledge, in the time of the Brāhmaṇas. Since the Brāhmaṇas represent already the blend of the indigenous and Indo-Aryan religion, it can be safely said that this type of the prescribed altars show a non-Indo-Aryan influence. But when and where this influence had taken place, it as a question not easy to answer. As long as no *vedi* has been found in association with the archaeological finds related to the immigrating Indo-Aryans, it could be, perhaps, said that the elaborate brick altars are really products of the early Brāhmanic period. It cannot be, however, excluded the possibility of an earlier date if we presuppose that the Proto-Indo-Aryans settled in such centres like Dashli came to know a sophisticated fire-cult centred around a brick fire-altar, adopted it, but used only for certain rites, say, like agnistoma. This is, though, hypothetic. In its favour may, however, speak the increased role of Agni which can be seen in the great number of R̥gvedic hymns addressed to him, the quoted instances of the horse- and ram-cult may also have some relevance.

The other god whose popularity grew immense, was Indra. His figure has become prominent in the process of conquests. Presumably only for those tribes which were participating in the conquering of Northern India. This is not seen alone in the increasing number of Indra hymns, but in the fate of this daēvic god in the Zoroastrianism. There Indra does not bear this name, he is called Verethraghna²¹, which is only a single aspect — although it seems to be a very early one — of his figure. He may be one of those daēvic gods which found their way as god into the Iranian's new religion, not merely through a compromise but before his figure had acquired the characteristic features seen in the R̥gveda.

On the basis of the aforesaid it seems that certain stages in the development of the religion of the Proto-Indo-Aryans can be discerned.

After the split of the Proto-Aryans into the Proto-Indo-Aryans and Proto-Iranians their religion has evolved on different patterns. Many of the earlier common gods had lost their significance or in the process of the adaptation to the new environmental (economic and cultural) factors changed their characteristics. Gods of the Proto-Indo-Aryans for the period of their settling in their respective headquarter-areas were *Varuna*,

Mitra, Indra, (the *Adityas*) and the *Nāsatyas*. Nothing is known about their fate with the surviving western Proto-Indo-Aryans. The eastern branch had, however, retained them but simultaneously adapted itself to the changes in way of life, accepted the influence of the substratum religion, visualizing new aims (i.e. conquering Northern India) helped new gods into foreground and accepted new rites. It was in Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan where these changes took place and resulted in the religious system of the *R̥gveda* and *R̥gvedic* pantheon in which *Agni* and *Indra* are now the chief deities. As the immigration of the Vedic Aryans into India was a long enduring process, the consecutive waves had found the earlier immigrants changed. The confrontation in each case cannot be attested so well in the field of the religion as in the socio-political background. What is known as the next stage, it is the transformation of the *R̥gvedic* religion (presumably the religion of the main bulk of the conquerors) under the influence of the Indian substratum. This will be the subject of another paper.

¹ Cf. A. A. Macdonell: *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1898. Since Macdonell's work a great deal of new publications is dedicated to the comparative studies on both sides: Iranian and Indo-Aryan. The best of its kind, giving most from our point of view is T. Burrow's "The Proto-Indo-Aryans", *JRAS* 1973/2. pp. 123–140. This work is abundantly quoted by G. Gnoli in his *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland. A Study on the Origins of Mazdeism and Related Problems*. Naples 1980.

² T. Burrow, quoting P. Thieme's article ("The 'Aryan' Gods of the Mitanni Treaties", *JAOS*, 60, 1960, 301–317.) rightly, points out that the Proto-Aryan religion can only be understood through the confrontation of Vedic and Avestan terminology. T. Burrow, op. cit. p. 123.

³ M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London, 1979. p. 61 f.

⁴ It is an anti-historic approach to the sources stating that although the Vedic hymns "record a genuine tradition and are concerned with real events" the information they contain is "almost valueless for historical purposes". etc. in: V. A. Smith: *The Oxford History of India*. Third revised ed. Oxford 1958. p. 52 f. — As a counterexample, it may be mentioned M. J. Shendge's article "Harappan and R̥gvedic Inter-relations" in the *Purātattva* 8. (1975–76. pp. 103–110), and her book *The Civilized Demons. The Harappans in R̥gveda*. Delhi 1977. — which around germs of correct observations create unverifiable theories and give arbitrary interpretation of archaeological finds. — One may admit, her works are not the only ones of this kind.

⁵ While the Kurus appear already in the *R̥gveda*, and are highly esteemed in the *Brāhmaṇas*, the Pāṇḍavas come into the foreground in the *Mahābhārata* only, and are referred to only in later Buddhist literature or with *Kātyāyana*. Cf. CHI I. p. 253. The epic tradition seems to preserve the remote relationship of the two tribes of which the Pāṇḍavas arrived evidently later yet claimed equal rights.

⁶ Ghirshman, R.: *Iran et la migration des Indo-Aryens et des Iraniens*. Leiden, 1977.

⁷ M. Mayrhofer, *Die Indo-Arier in Alten Vorderasien*. Wiesbaden 1966. — T. Burrow, op. cit. p. 125. calls them collectively Proto-Indo-Aryans suggesting that the split of the Proto-Aryans resulted in two branches: Proto-Indo-Aryans and Proto-Iranians. "Linguistically, — he admits —, Proto-Indo-Aryan refers to that stage of the language existing before the migrations into India and after the separation from Iranian" and "On the other hand the term Proto-Indo-Aryan as used in this paper refers not only to the pre-migration Indo-Aryans, but also to all those who did not make the migration to India or migrated elsewhere, and their descendants".

⁸ The scattered evidence found since the beginning of the excavations is giving gradually place to a coherent picture based on the excavations carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission of ISMEO in the Swat Valley since the 50s, by the Soviet–Afghan

Archaeological Expedition in North Afghanistan in the 60s–70s, by the Pakistani excavations led by A. H. Dani, and many other, mostly earlier explorations in the areas in concern, e.g. of J. M. Casal, B. Cardi, W. Fairervis. — For linguistic evidence see *T. Burrow: The Proto-Indo-Aryans*. p. 126 ff. Moreover, there are hints about some Indo-Aryan tribes infiltrating or allowed to live in the Indus Valley territories. Apart from the textual evidence which might be collected from some Rgvedic hymns, excavations had brought to light in Lothal fire-altars, quite unusual in Indus Valley context, and for a greater surprise, human skeletal remains buried together with goats. Cf. *S. R. Rao, Lothal and the Indus Civilization*, Bombay, 1973. p. 147 ff.

⁹ *E. Mackay, Early Indus Civilization*. London 1948. Chpt. I. *S. Piggott, Prehistoric India*. London 1950. Esp. chpt. VI. and VII. — *Sir M. Wheeler, The Indus Civilization*, Cambridge 1968³. p. 131 ff. *T. Burrow* in his article "On the Significance of the Term arma-, armaka- in Early Sanskrit Literature", *JIH XLI/1*. (1963) pp. 159–166 finds philological support to this theory. This, however, may not be the case: the Vedic references could easily be taken as reflections of the situation found: abandoned, fire-hit ruins of Harappan cities were easy to interpret by the Vedic seers as destructed by the Aryans themselves. More recent studies emphasises the gap between the abandoning the Indus settlements in the northern areas of the Civilization and coming of the Indo-Aryans. Also, the reasons for the "end" of the Indus Civilization can now be better seen in the light of *G. F. Dales' investigations*. See, for instance, "The Decline of the Harappans" *SA. CCXIV. No. 5*. (1966) pp. 92–100.

¹⁰ *A. Azzaroli, "The Proto-Historic Horse Skeletons from Swat, Pakistan"*, *EW Volt*. 25/3–4. pp. 353 ff. — *W. Fairervis, The Roots of Ancient India. The Archaeology of Early Indian Civilization*. 2nd, revised ed. Chicago 1975. p. 356 ff.

¹¹ *V. I. Sarianidi, Drevniye zemledeley Afghanistana*. Moscow, 1977. pp. 51, 102; Plt. 24/2. Terracotta, alabaster ram figurines, ram burials were unearthed at Dashli.

¹² It could be recollected the relationship of Agni and Aja ('ram'), the he-goat leading the sacrificial horse to the nether world during the horse-sacrifice with the horse on the one hand, and with the death on the other: his skin is being used as death-bed for the corpse. As "leader" he is directly identified with Agni, too.

¹³ *Sarianidi*, op. cit. p. 34 ff.

¹⁴ *M. Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism*. I. Leiden 1975. pp. 154–55. *Id.*: *Zoroastrians. Their religious Beliefs and Practices*. London 1979. p. 63. Cf. however, *G. Gnoli, Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980.

¹⁵ *Boyce, The History*, p. 154 f. — *Boyce, Zoroastrians*, p. 4. — cf. the three types of the Vedic fire-altars.

¹⁶ *Burrow*, op. cit. p. 126: "... Proto-Indoaryans must have been in occupation of large tracts of eastern Iran and western Afghanistan (such as Bactria, Areia (Haraiva), Arachosia and Drangiana), which only at a later period came into possession of the Iranians".

¹⁷ *Burrow*, op. cit. esp. p. 127–29.

¹⁸ I.e. both for their Indian and western branch living in Central Northern Iran. *Burrow*, op. cit. 134 ff.; *Ghirshman*, op. cit. p. 23 ff. on the ground of archaeological evidence names the Gorgan plateau as their inhabitation area before they moved further west. Following *Burrow's* arguments it seems that from that area only some groups penetrated into Near East, others staying back were later found in Māzandarān and still later, with the advance of the Iranian control, in the area of the Lake Urmia (*Burrow*, op. cit. p. 139–40).

¹⁹ As *Burrow* did pointing out the origin of the daēva-demons in the Avesta.

²⁰ *T. Burrow*, op. cit.

²¹ *Boyce, Zoroastrians*, p. 10–11.